PATTERNS OF POWER · THE SETTLEMENT PROTOCOL

The Law With No Sword

Medieval Iceland, the Anchor That Had No Floor, and What the Enforcer Was Always For, 930–1262

HELD AS TESTED, NOT REVEALED

Preface: the collaboration, and what this study is for

On how the work was made, the question it asks, and the discipline it is held in.

This study is part of the Patterns of Power series and, like the others, it is a collaboration. The research direction, the case selection, and the judgement are the author's; the historical synthesis, the drafting, and much of the scholarly retrieval were done with Claude, Anthropic's model, each claim checked against the record before the next was begun. The method is stated openly because it is an emerging form of knowledge production and ought to be visible rather than concealed.

This study exists to test a thing the series had quietly assumed and never examined. Across every case so far, an order has had two parts: an *anchor* — a shared source of legitimate title that coordinates the armed elite — and a *floor* — the coercive apparatus, the state, the army, the enforcer, that does the actual holding-down while the anchor does the coordinating. The series has studied the anchor obsessively and taken the floor almost for granted, as though every order simply has one. Medieval Iceland is the case that removes the floor and leaves the anchor standing alone, so we can finally see what the floor was doing. For over three centuries, Iceland had law — famous, elaborate, sophisticated law, recited from memory each year before the whole assembled nation — and courts that issued binding judgments, and no one at all whose job was to enforce them. No king, no army, no police, no sheriff, no official of any kind with the power to make a man obey a verdict. It is the purest natural experiment the record offers: an anchor with no floor beneath it. And it ran for three hundred and thirty-two years before it came apart.

The question this study asks is therefore exact: *can an anchor hold a settlement of armed men together with no floor of force beneath it — can law and shared belief alone, with no enforcer, convert a warlord's world into a durable order?* The answer turns out to be a conditional yes that becomes a definite no, and the condition is the finding. The framework is stated in full below; no prior reading is required. It is held as tested, not revealed, and this case both confirms it and refines it in a way the series needed. To explain how the Icelandic order held and then failed is neither to romanticise its long peace — which rested on the ordinary brutalities of a slave-owning medieval society — nor to moralise its collapse.

THE LAW WITH NO SWORD
SECTION ONE

The puzzle

A society ran for three centuries with law but no one to enforce it — and then, having fled kings, begged a king to rule them.

Around the year 870, boatloads of Norse settlers began arriving on an empty island in the North Atlantic. Many of them were fleeing something specific: the consolidation of Norway under its first unifying king, Harald Fairhair, who was breaking the old independent chieftains and gathering their power to his throne. The people who sailed to Iceland were, disproportionately, the sort who would not be ruled that way — chieftains and free farmers who preferred an empty rock in a cold sea to a king above their heads. And on that rock they built something extraordinary: a society with law but no ruler.

In 930 they established the **Althing**, an annual assembly where law was made and disputes were judged — one of the oldest parliamentary institutions in the world. They developed an intricate legal system, courts at local and national levels, a formal procedure for suits, and an official called the **law-speaker** whose job was to hold the entire legal code in his memory and recite a third of it aloud each year to the assembled people. It was, by the standards of the medieval world, a strikingly law-governed society — legalistic, procedural, litigious, its sagas full of men who knew the law and used it.

And here is the astonishing thing, the thing that makes Iceland unique in the medieval West and a gift to this inquiry: **there was no one to enforce any of it.** The Althing made law and the courts pronounced judgment, but there was no executive branch, no state, no royal officer, no standing force, no police, no public prosecutor — nothing. When a court found against a man, it did not send anyone to punish him. Enforcement of the verdict was left entirely to the winning party and whatever allies he could muster. The law said what was right; making the wrong-doer actually

pay was a private undertaking. A society of armed, proud, feud-prone Norsemen ran on law that no state stood behind, for over three hundred years.

And then, in the thirteenth century, it fell apart — into a spiral of feuding so bloody the Icelanders named the age after the family at its centre, the Sturlungs. And it ended in the most poignant way imaginable. The descendants of men who had crossed an ocean to escape a Norwegian king signed, in 1262, a covenant *inviting the Norwegian king to rule them* — surrendering the three-century experiment in stateless law and asking the very kind of authority their ancestors had fled to come and hold their island down. The puzzle is double. How did law with no sword behind it hold a warlord society together for three centuries? And why, having held that long, did it collapse so completely that its heirs begged for the king their founders had crossed the sea to escape?

THE LAW WITH NO SWORD
SECTION TWO

The framework, for a reader who has not met it

Possession against ownership, the anchor, the floor, and the coordination the anchor performs.

Begin with a distinction. **Possession** is what force holds in the present; force is entirely adequate to it. **Ownership** is a claim about the future and about other people — that a holding persists across the holder's absence and death, honoured by others as a right. Force cannot by itself reach ownership, because ownership is a structure of expectations about how others will behave over time. A world of armed men who hold only by force is a world of endemic conflict, because nothing makes any holding safe once the holder is weak.

What makes holdings safe is an **anchor**: a shared source of legitimate title, from which the standing of the powerful derives, placed beyond the reach of the men competing for power. The anchor works by coordination. If every man's rightful place flows from one source that none of them can seize or rewrite, then a grab at any place is an attack on the ground beneath all of them, and the others have a shared reason to combine against the grabber — not from loyalty but because letting the grab stand would unmake their own titles. The anchor turns rivals into an automatic coalition against whoever reaches beyond what it grants, and, forecasting that coalition, no one reaches. A working anchor is **determinate** (one answer to who holds what and who comes next), **common knowledge** (all know all recognise it), **attached to an office rather than a person** (so it survives a death), and above all **unforgeable by the men competing** (so none can counterfeit or capture it).

But — and this is the piece this study exists to isolate — the anchor is not the whole of an order. Beneath it, in every case the series has examined, sits a **floor**: the actual coercive apparatus that does the enforcing. The anchor *coordinates* — it tells

the armed men whose side to take, and against whom. The floor *executes* — it is the army, the officers, the state machinery that actually catches the wrongdoer and imposes the penalty. In most orders the two are fused and invisible as separate things: the king is both the anchor's holder (the legitimate sovereign) and the floor's commander (the man with the army), so one never has to ask which part is doing the work. The anchor tells everyone the king is rightful; the king's soldiers make his judgments stick. The coordination and the enforcement run together, and it is easy to mistake them for one thing.

Iceland is the case that pulls them apart, because Iceland built an anchor and *no floor*. It had a source of legitimate title — the law — that was determinate, common knowledge, and unforgeable. But it had no state, no army, no enforcer: no floor. So it lets us ask the question the fused cases never allow. When the anchor says a man is in the wrong and owes a penalty, and there is no floor to collect it — what happens? Does the coordination alone suffice? Can the automatic coalition the anchor summons *be* the floor — can the armed men themselves, coordinated by the law, serve as their own enforcer? For three centuries in Iceland, the answer was yes. And then it was no, and the reason it turned from yes to no is the whole finding of this study.

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SECTION THREE

The historical spine

What happened, for a reader who knows nothing of medieval Iceland.

The settlers who filled Iceland between roughly 870 and 930 were mostly Norse, many by way of the Norse colonies in the British Isles, and they arrived as independent households — a chieftain or a substantial farmer, his family, his followers, his slaves. There was no conqueror, no founding king, no army of occupation. The island was empty (save, by tradition, a few Irish hermits who left), and it filled up with free households who owed allegiance to no one above them. This is the crucial starting condition: Iceland did not begin as a conquest that then had to be legitimated. It began as a scatter of rough equals who needed a way to live together without killing each other and without a king.

Their solution was the **goði** system. A goði was a chieftain, and a *goðorð* was his chieftaincy — but the Icelandic chieftaincy was a peculiar thing, and its peculiarity matters. It was not a territory. It was a bundle of authority — the right to sit in the assembly, to nominate judges, to lead a following — and, critically, it was *private property*: it could be inherited, sold, split, or given away, like any other asset. And the followers of a goði, the free farmers who backed him, were not his subjects bound to his land. They *chose* him, and — this is the astonishing part — they could *leave* him and attach themselves to a different goði without moving house, simply by declaring the switch. A chieftain's power was his following, and his following was voluntary and portable. This built competition into the system: a goði who abused or failed to protect his farmers could lose them to a rival, so chieftains had reason to serve their followers' interests, at least while power remained roughly balanced.

Over this sat the **Althing**, founded around 930 at Þingvellir, a plain of black rock and fissures where the whole nation gathered each summer. The Althing had two functions: it was the legislature, where the assembled goðar declared and amended the law, and it was the supreme court, where the biggest disputes were judged. Local

assemblies (things) handled smaller matters; appeals ran up to the Althing's courts, and eventually a "Fifth Court" was added as a final tribunal. Presiding in a sense — though with no executive power — was the **law-speaker**, elected for a term, whose duty was to memorise the entire law and recite a portion each year, so that the law lived in a human voice, publicly, before all. Around the year 1000 the Althing adopted Christianity by collective legal decision — famously, the law-speaker was asked to rule on whether the nation would convert, and did, and both sides accepted it — which tells you how much authority the law and its assembly held, and how little force: a nation's religion decided by a legal ruling, obeyed because it was law, not because anyone could compel it.

For its first two centuries and more, this system delivered a striking degree of order. Feuds happened — the sagas are full of them — but they were largely contained by law: killing was not a crime against a state but a wrong against a family, requiring compensation (*wergild*) assessed by law, and most disputes were channelled into suits, arbitration, and settlement rather than open war. The society grew, prospered by medieval standards, and produced a literature — the sagas — out of all proportion to its size. Then, in the early thirteenth century, the balance broke. Chieftaincies, being property, could be accumulated, and they were: over generations, control of the goðorð concentrated into the hands of a few large families, until a handful of "big chieftains" (*stórhöfðingjar*) commanded regional power on a scale no earlier goði had held. At the same time, the king of Norway — Hákon IV — began recruiting these big chieftains as his vassals, offering them gifts, status, and backing in exchange for working toward bringing Iceland under his crown. The combination was fatal. The concentrated chieftains fought each other in wars the old law could no longer contain — the **Age of the Sturlungs**, roughly 1220 to 1264, the bloodiest period in Icelandic history, with battles of over a thousand men a side. Exhausted by decades of feud the Althing could no longer settle, and drawn one by one into the Norwegian king's orbit, the Icelandic chieftains finally accepted his sovereignty. The **Old Covenant** (*Gamli sáttmáli*) of 1262–1264 made the king of Norway the ruler of Iceland, and the Commonwealth was over.

THE LAW WITH NO SWORD
SECTION FOUR

The anchor that was the law itself

Why Iceland's law satisfied every property of an anchor except the one that needed a floor.

Name the anchor precisely: in Iceland it was **the law**. Not a king, not a god primarily, not a bloodline — the law itself, as recited by the law-speaker and declared by the Althing, was the shared source from which every free man's rights and standing derived. And it satisfied the properties of a working anchor with a completeness that is almost diagrammatic.

It was **determinate**. The Icelandic legal system was famously precise — elaborate procedures, exact compensations, defined categories of wrong. When a dispute arose, the law yielded an answer: this man is in the right, that man owes this penalty. There was little of the ambiguity that lets rival claimants each assert legitimacy; the law spoke to the case.

It was **common knowledge** to a degree no other case in the series can match, because it was *literally recited aloud to the entire nation every year*. The law-speaker's annual recitation at the Althing was a machine for manufacturing common knowledge in its purest form: every free man heard the law, and saw every other free man hearing it, so that no one could claim not to know it and everyone knew that everyone knew. The oral, public, ceremonial character of Icelandic law was not a primitive substitute for writing; it was a common-knowledge engine, ensuring that the shared source of title was shared, visibly, by all at once.

It was **unforgeable by the competitors** in the specific sense that mattered: no single chieftain could rewrite it. The law was changed only by the assembled Althing, the collective body — which meant that no individual player in the game could alter the source of title to his own advantage. A goði could win a suit or lose one, but he could not *change the law* under which suits were decided, any more than a Venetian could capture the lottery or an English baron rewrite the law of Edward. The source sat above every competitor.

And it was, in a real sense, **attached to an office rather than a person** — indeed to an institution, the Althing, and to the impersonal recited code, rather than to any man. The law-speaker held the words but did not own them; he recited a code that was the nation's, not his, and his term ended and another took his place while the law continued. The anchor was the law, and the law belonged to no one.

So Iceland had a genuine, high-quality anchor — arguably one of the purest in the corpus, an impersonal law that coordinated the whole free population and that no competitor could forge. And for the coordination work an anchor does, it functioned: for three centuries it told Icelanders who was in the right and who in the wrong, and channelled the endemic violence of a Norse warrior society into suits and settlements and assessed compensations rather than open war. What it did *not* have — what Iceland uniquely lacked — was a floor. And the whole history of the Commonwealth is the story of the anchor doing its coordination job well, and the missing floor being supplied, precariously, by something that worked only until it didn't.

THE LAW WITH NO SWORD
SECTION FIVE

The floor that was rough equality

How the coalition became its own enforcer — and the hidden condition that made it work.

Here is the mechanism at the heart of the Icelandic achievement, and it is the most interesting thing the case has to teach. Iceland had no floor — no state enforcer — so where did enforcement come from? The answer is that the anchor's own coordination mechanism was made to serve, precariously, as the floor. The automatic coalition that an anchor summons *became* the instrument of enforcement. And it worked because of a hidden condition that the case lets us see for the first time: **rough equality of power.**

Follow the enforcement of a judgment. A court finds that a man has done a wrong and owes a penalty — a payment, or outlawry, the sentence that put a man outside the law's protection so that anyone might kill him without penalty. There is no sheriff to collect the payment or carry out the outlawry. So the wronged party must do it himself — but not alone. He calls on his goði and his allies and his kin, and they enforce the verdict: they compel the payment, or they hunt the outlaw. Why do they help? Because the law is the anchor, and each of them knows that a world where *this* judgment can be defied with impunity is a world where the judgments protecting *their own* holdings can be defied too. Enforcing the law against the wrongdoer is each ally's own interest at one remove, exactly as the anchor's coordination logic predicts. The coalition that the anchor summons to punish an aggressor is, in Iceland, the very same coalition that enforces an ordinary verdict. The anchor's coordination *is* the floor.

But this works only under a condition that Iceland's early centuries silently supplied and its last century fatally lost: the wrongdoer must not be too strong to punish. The private-coalition floor can enforce a judgment against a chieftain of ordinary power, because a coalition of his peers plus the wronged party outweighs

him. It *cannot* enforce a judgment against a chieftain who has grown so powerful that no coalition his neighbours can raise is able to defeat him. The whole mechanism rests on the assumption that any single wrongdoer can be overpowered by a combination of the others — which is to say, on rough equality of power among the players. So long as chieftains were many and roughly comparable, the law had teeth, because behind any verdict stood the credible threat of a coalition stronger than the man it judged. The floor was not a state; the floor was the *distribution of power itself*, the rough parity that guaranteed a defiant man could always be outmatched. Iceland's genius, mostly unplanned, was to have discovered that a society of rough equals can use the anchor's coordination as its own enforcer, and so run law with no state — for exactly as long as the equality lasts.

This is the refinement Iceland adds to the framework, and it is a real one. The series had treated the floor as a thing an order has or builds — an army, a state. Iceland shows that a floor need not be a centralised apparatus at all: a *distributed* floor, made of nothing but the rough equality of the armed players and their willingness to coalesce behind the anchor's verdicts, can substitute for a state enforcer. But it shows this by also showing the distributed floor's fatal condition. A centralised floor — a king's army — does not care whether power among the subjects is equal; it overpowers any single subject regardless. A distributed floor *depends entirely* on rough equality, because it enforces only by coalition, and a coalition can only overpower a man who is not stronger than the coalition. The distributed floor is therefore a floor with a hidden structural fragility the centralised kind does not have: it fails the moment power concentrates. And in Iceland, over three centuries, power concentrated.

THE LAW WITH NO SWORD
SECTION SIX

The concentration that pulled the floor out

How the chieftaincy-as-property destroyed the equality the whole system rested on.

The fragility was built into the system from the start, in a feature that looked innocuous and even attractive: the chieftaincy was *private property*. A goðorð could be inherited, bought, sold, and combined. In a world of rough equality this seemed a virtue — it made chieftaincy a matter of free transaction rather than fixed hereditary caste, and it let the competition for followers work. But property accumulates. What can be bought can be bought *up*, and over the generations of the Commonwealth, the chieftaincies were bought up. Ambitious families acquired multiple goðorð, combined them, and passed the accumulations on, until the roughly comparable chieftains of the early Commonwealth had given way, by the early thirteenth century, to a handful of great families each controlling a whole region — the Sturlungs, the Haukdælir, the Ásbirningar, and a few others, perhaps seven dominant kin-groups where there had once been dozens of independent goðar.

And this concentration pulled the floor out from under the anchor, exactly as the mechanism predicts. Once a few *stórhöfðingjar* each commanded a following of hundreds or a thousand armed men, the enforcement coalition could no longer form against them, because no combination of ordinary chieftains could outmatch a great one — and the great ones, rather than being subject to the law's coalition, now *were* the coalition, or its rivals. A judgment against a Sturlung meant nothing if no one could enforce it against a Sturlung. The law still spoke; the anchor still declared who was in the right; but the distributed floor that had made the anchor's verdicts bite had dissolved, because rough equality had dissolved. The concentrated chieftains fought their disputes not through suits the law could enforce but through war the

law could no longer contain, because the thing that had always ultimately backed the law — the credible threat of a stronger coalition — no longer existed against the strongest players. The anchor was intact. The floor was gone. And an anchor with no floor is a set of instructions with nothing behind them: it can tell everyone who is in the wrong, and it cannot make the wrong-doer pay, and once the wrongdoers are the strongest men in the land, the telling is all that is left.

This is the finding the case was built to yield, and it inverts a common misreading of Iceland as a libertarian idyll of stateless law. Iceland did have a floor for most of its history; the floor was rough equality, and it worked. What killed the Commonwealth was not the absence of a state but the *erosion of the equality that had substituted for one* — and the erosion was driven by the very feature, chieftaincy-as-property, that had made the early system so fluid and attractive. The market in chieftaincies that distributed power in the beginning concentrated it in the end, and when it concentrated past the point where any coalition could overpower the greatest players, the distributed floor failed and there was no centralised floor to fall back on. The society had no state to hold it down when its own rough equality gave out, and so, having no floor of its own to reach for, it reached for someone else's.

THE LAW WITH NO SWORD
SECTION SEVEN

The second author across the water

How the Norwegian king corroded the settlement from outside, and why the fugitives from monarchy invited one in.

There was a second force pulling the Commonwealth apart, and it is one the series has a precise name for, because it has appeared before: a **second author of title**. An anchor holds a settlement only if it is the *single* source from which the armed men's standing derives. If a second source appears — a rival author who can also confer legitimacy, status, and backing — then the men who take their standing from the second source are pulled out of the first settlement, and the coalition the original anchor summons will no longer reliably form, because some of the players now answer to a different master.

In Iceland, the second author was the **king of Norway**. Through the decades of the Sturlung Age, King Hákon IV did not conquer Iceland; he *recruited* it, one great chieftain at a time. He took the big chieftains as his vassals, and in exchange for their working toward Norwegian sovereignty he gave them gifts, followers, honours, and the prestige of association with a real crown. This is the second-author mechanism operating with unusual clarity. A Sturlung chieftain who became the king's vassal now derived a portion of his standing not from the Icelandic law-anchor but from the Norwegian king — an external source the Icelandic law could not touch, reach, or overrule. His interest was no longer wholly bound to the domestic settlement; part of it now ran across the sea to Norway. And because the greatest chieftains, one after another, took the king's patronage, the domestic anchor was progressively hollowed: its coordination could not bind men who were increasingly coordinating on a different, external, more powerful source of title and reward. The king actively encouraged the feuds, because a divided and exhausted Iceland was easier to absorb, and every chieftain he recruited both weakened the domestic settlement and strengthened the alternative to it.

So the Commonwealth was pulled apart by two forces at once, and they reinforced each other. From *within*, the concentration of chieftaincy-as-property destroyed the rough equality that had served as the floor, so that the law's verdicts could no longer be enforced against the greatest players. From *without*, the Norwegian king appeared as a second author of title, drawing the greatest players out of the domestic settlement and into his own, funding the very feuds that concentration had made unstoppable. The internal failure and the external one were not separate stories; the concentration produced a few chieftains big enough to be worth recruiting, and the king's recruitment gave those chieftains an external base that made them still less answerable to the domestic anchor. Between them, the floor was gone and the anchor was hollowed, and there was nothing left to hold the settlement together.

Which is why the ending has the shape it has, and why that shape is so bitter. A society founded by men who had crossed the ocean *fleeing* the centralised Norwegian monarchy of Harald Fairhair ended, three and a third centuries later, by *inviting the centralised Norwegian monarchy of Hákon IV to rule them*. Stripped of the rough equality that had been their floor, and hollowed by a king who had made himself a second author of their elites' legitimacy, the Icelanders had no domestic apparatus left that could hold their island down — and when a society's floor fails and it has no state to fall back on, the only way to stop the bleeding is to *import a floor*. The Old Covenant of 1262 is the purchase of a floor from abroad. The Icelanders gave up their three-century experiment in stateless law and accepted a king, because a king comes with an army, and an army is a floor, and they had discovered the hard way that an anchor with no floor cannot survive the concentration of force. The fugitives from monarchy begged for a monarch, because the monarch had the one thing their beautiful, sword-less law had always lacked: someone to make it obey.

THE LAW WITH NO SWORD
SECTION EIGHT

What the case shows, and where it strains

The floor isolated at last — and the honest complications.

What it shows. Iceland is the control condition for the *floor*, exactly as the Wallenstein case was the control condition for the *anchor*, and together they bracket the two halves of every order in the series. Wallenstein had a floor (the largest army in Europe) and no anchor, and his force dissolved the moment its coordination point was withdrawn, proving the anchor is necessary. Iceland had an anchor (an impersonal, unforgeable, common-knowledge law) and no floor, and it held for three centuries and then failed, proving the floor is necessary too — and proving something more precise about what the floor *is*. The case establishes that the floor need not be a centralised state: a *distributed* floor, made of the rough equality of the armed players and their willingness to coalesce behind the anchor's verdicts, can enforce law with no enforcer, and can do so durably, for centuries. But it establishes with equal clarity the distributed floor's fatal condition — that it works only under rough equality, and fails the instant power concentrates past the point where a coalition can overpower the strongest player. This is a genuine addition to the framework: it distinguishes two kinds of floor, centralised and distributed, and identifies the specific, datable failure mode of the distributed kind. And the case supplies, in the Norwegian king, an unusually clean instance of the second-author mechanism — a rival source of title corroding a settlement from outside — showing how internal concentration and external recruitment can compound into a collapse neither would have produced alone.

Above all, Iceland answers the question the series had never quite had to ask, because its cases always fused the anchor and the floor in a single sovereign. The question was: what is the enforcer *for*, if the anchor already coordinates the armed

men into a coalition? And the answer is that the coordination is not self-executing against a sufficiently strong defector. The anchor can always tell the coalition to form; it cannot guarantee the coalition will be *strong enough* to win. A floor — whether the distributed floor of rough equality or the centralised floor of a state — is what guarantees that the coalition the anchor summons can actually overpower the man it is summoned against. Without that guarantee, the anchor is a set of true statements about who is in the wrong, addressed to people who cannot make the wrongdoer pay. The enforcer was always for the case where the wrongdoer is strong.

Where it strains. Two honest complications. First, the collapse was overdetermined, and the framework should not claim the internal mechanism alone explains it. The concentration of chieftaincies and the Norwegian king's recruitment ran together, and it is genuinely hard to say which was decisive — whether Iceland would have spiralled into the Sturlung wars on internal concentration alone, without a foreign king funding and encouraging the feuds, or whether the king could have absorbed a still-balanced Iceland without the concentration to exploit. The honest reading is that the two causes compounded and cannot be cleanly separated; the framework illuminates the *structure* of the failure (floor lost within, second author gained without) but cannot assign the weights, and a reading that made the internal concentration the whole story would be too tidy. Second, the "stateless idyll" that some modern admirers see in Commonwealth Iceland — and which this study has partly leaned on to make the no-floor point vivid — is itself somewhat romanticised. The early Commonwealth was not peaceful in any modern sense; it was a slave-owning society whose sagas record constant killing, and its "order" was the relative containment of feud, not its absence. The contrast between a serene early Commonwealth and a violent Sturlung Age, which the tidy version of this study invites, is partly an artefact of the sources and of nationalist historiography, and the reader should discount it accordingly. The structural point — anchor without floor, floor as rough equality, failure by concentration — survives the discount, but the picture of a lost golden age does not.

THE LAW WITH NO SWORD
SECTION NINE

The disciplines: what this analysis must not flatten

Four cautions.

The distributed floor is a real refinement, not a redefinition that saves the theory by fiat. There is a temptation, when a framework meets a case that seems to lack one of its parts, to redefine the part so the case has it after all — to say "well, rough equality *was* the floor" in a way that makes the theory unfalsifiable. The guard against this is that the distributed floor is specified *independently* and makes a *distinct prediction*: it says an anchor-plus-equality order will hold while power stays balanced and fail when power concentrates, and Iceland's history matches that prediction with a datable turn. If Iceland had concentrated and *not* collapsed, or stayed balanced and collapsed anyway, the refinement would be wrong. It is not a redefinition to save the theory; it is a new claim the case tests and confirms.

"No floor" is a claim about the executive, not about the absence of all force. Iceland had plenty of force — every chieftain and farmer was armed, and violence was common. The claim is not that Iceland was without violence but that it was without a *state monopoly* on enforcement, without any apparatus whose job was to execute the law's verdicts. The force was there; it was simply private and distributed, which is the whole point. To say Iceland had "no floor" is shorthand for "no centralised floor," and the study's finding is precisely that the distributed alternative worked conditionally and then failed.

Legibility is not pardon, in both directions. Explaining why the Commonwealth held is not praising it — it rested on slavery and endemic feud, and its "freedom" was the freedom of armed male householders, not of the enslaved or the poor. And explaining why it fell is not lamenting that a more effective coercive

order was not built sooner; the Norwegian floor the Icelanders imported was not a liberation but a subjection, and the study passes no verdict that either the stateless order or its royal replacement was good. It describes a structure and its failure, and holds its moral judgements separate from its structural ones.

The second-author mechanism must not be inflated into the whole cause. This study has used the Norwegian king to illustrate the second-author dynamic cleanly, but should not let the clean illustration overstate the king's role. The internal concentration was real and might have been sufficient; the king exploited a fragility that the Icelanders had built themselves. The external author accelerated and directed a collapse whose deepest cause was domestic. To make the foreign king the villain of the piece would be to miss that the fatal flaw — chieftaincy as accumulable property, and a floor made only of equality — was Iceland's own from the founding.

Conclusion: the sword the law never had

Returning to the puzzle.

The puzzle was how a society could run for three centuries on law that no state stood behind, and why, having held that long, it collapsed so completely that its heirs invited the very kind of king their founders had fled.

The answer is that Iceland built one half of an order and, for three hundred years, improvised the other. It built an anchor of rare purity — an impersonal, common-knowledge, unforgeable law, recited to the whole nation each year, that no single chieftain could rewrite — and this anchor did the coordination work an anchor does, telling Icelanders who was in the right and marshalling the coalition that enforced it. What Iceland never built was a floor, an enforcer, a sword behind the law. Instead it improvised one out of the only material a stateless society of rough equals possesses: the rough equality itself. So long as the chieftains were many and comparable, the coalition the anchor summoned was always stronger than the man it was summoned against, and the law had teeth because a defiant man could always be overpowered. The distributed floor of equality did, for three centuries, the work a king's army does elsewhere.

But the distributed floor had a fatal condition the centralised kind does not, and the Commonwealth's own founding feature slowly triggered it. Because the chieftaincy was property, it could be accumulated, and over generations it was, until a few great families each held power no coalition of ordinary chieftains could match. The equality that had been the floor eroded into concentration, and once the greatest players were stronger than any coalition that could be raised against them, the law's verdicts could no longer bind them, and the anchor was left speaking true judgments that no one could enforce. And as the concentration created chieftains

big enough to be worth recruiting, the king of Norway appeared across the water as a second author of title, drawing those chieftains out of the domestic settlement and into his own, funding the feuds the eroded floor could no longer contain. Anchor hollowed from without, floor dissolved from within, the Commonwealth had nothing left to hold itself together — and a society whose own floor has failed, and which has no state to fall back on, can only import one. The Icelanders bought a floor from Norway with their independence, because the king had the sword their law had never had.

That is what Iceland adds to the series, and it is the mirror of every other case. The durable orders fuse the anchor and the floor so completely in a single sovereign that one cannot see them as two things. Iceland pulled them apart and ran on the anchor alone, propped by an improvised floor of equality, and so it shows — as no fused case can — exactly what the floor was always for. The anchor tells the armed men who is in the wrong. The floor is what makes the wrongdoer pay when he is too strong to be told. A law with no sword can govern a society of equals for a very long time, because among equals the coalition is the sword. But let the equals become unequal, and the law without a sword becomes what Iceland's law became in the age of the Sturlungs: the true and useless recitation of who was in the right, in a land where the men who were in the wrong had grown too strong for anyone to make them answer for it.

THE LAW WITH NO SWORD
SOURCES

A note on sources and scholarship

What this rests on, what is standard, and what is contested.

The framework. The theory applied here — possession against ownership, the anchor and its four properties, the distinction between the anchor (coordination) and the floor (enforcement), the sole-authorship condition, and the second-author mechanism — is developed in the companion papers of this series and applied here rather than argued from scratch. Its components include Max Weber on the state as the monopoly of legitimate force (the definition against which Iceland's statelessness is measured), Thomas Schelling on coordination (the mechanism by which the anchor summons a coalition), Michael Chwe on public ceremony as a manufacturer of common knowledge (the law-speaker's annual recitation being a near-perfect instance), and the general framework's treatment of the floor and of rival authors of title. The distributed-floor refinement — that rough equality can substitute for a centralised enforcer, conditionally — is this study's addition.

The historical spine. The settlement of Iceland from c. 870 by Norse migrants, many fleeing the consolidation of Norway under Harald Fairhair; the founding of the Althing c. 930 at Þingvellir; the goði/goðorð system, in which chieftaincies were private, transferable property and followers could freely change allegiance; the law-speaker's role in memorising and reciting the law; the absence of any executive or enforcement apparatus, so that judgments were privately enforced; the legal adoption of Christianity c. 1000; the containment of feud through compensation and suit for the first two centuries; the accumulation and concentration of chieftaincies into a few dominant kin-groups (the Sturlungs, Haukdælir, Ásbirningar, and others) by the early thirteenth century; the recruitment of the great chieftains as vassals by King Hákon IV of Norway beginning with Snorri Sturluson in 1220; the Age of the Sturlungs (c. 1220–1264) and its large battles (Örlygsstaðir,

with over a thousand men on each side, the largest in Icelandic history); and the submission to Norway in the Old Covenant (Gamli sáttmáli) of 1262–1264 — all follow the standard record. Jesse Byock's *Viking Age Iceland* and *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, William Ian Miller's *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson's *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* are the standard scholarly treatments; the *Sturlunga saga* is the principal primary source for the age of collapse.

Contested and interpretive. The reading of Iceland as an "anchor with no floor," and of rough equality as a *distributed floor* that substitutes conditionally for a state, is this framework's structural interpretation, offered in its own terms and testable against the record, not a claim made in these words by the historians. The relative weight of internal concentration versus Norwegian royal interference in causing the collapse is genuinely debated, and this study deliberately declines to assign weights, treating the two as compounding causes. The degree to which the early Commonwealth was genuinely peaceful and orderly, as against the "moral decay" reading of the Sturlung Age as a fall from a golden age, is contested in the scholarship (the golden-age framing owes something to later nationalist historiography), and this study flags its reliance on the contrast while noting that the structural finding does not depend on it. The libertarian reading of Commonwealth Iceland as a model of stateless order is noted and specifically qualified: the finding here is not that stateless law is durable, but that it is durable *only under rough equality* and fails predictably when power concentrates.

On what is not attempted. This study makes no claim to original historical research. It is an analytical synthesis applying a structural framework to an established record, and its contribution, if any, lies in reading medieval Iceland as the control condition for the *floor* — the mirror of the anchorless counter-cases — and in the refinement it yields: that a floor may be distributed (rough equality) rather than centralised (a state), that the distributed floor can run an anchored order for centuries, and that it fails by a specific and datable mechanism, the concentration of power past the point where any coalition can overpower the strongest player. Where the framework and the record disagree, the record wins, and the section on where the case strains is the part its author considers most worth keeping.